

Veterans Day is an opportunity for all of us to stop and think about this great nation we live in. It's a nation marked by unparalleled freedoms and liberties that allow us to voice our opinions, worship as we please, pursue the careers of our choice and strive for unfettered success.

The first Armistice Day was declared on November 11, 1919 by President Woodrow Wilson. The day was to "be filled with solemn pride in the heroism of those died in the country's service and with gratitude for the victory, both because of the thing from which is has freed us and because of the opportunity it has given America to show her sympathy with peace and justice in the councils of the nations..."

Those words remain as true today as they were in the wake of World War I. We continue to engage in battles for freedom and justice throughout the world, and the men and women in uniform making today's sacrifices deserve the same respect and gratitude.

As a member of the House Committee on Veterans Affairs, I have made supporting our veterans one of my key priorities. I recently hired an extraordinary young man to work in my office and handle veterans' casework. Sgt. Ismael Vasquez was wounded on April 24, 2004 – a day known as Black Sunday for its extreme violence and bloodshed. Ismael was stationed in Iraq and that day was in the Baghdad neighborhood of Sadr City. As a gun battle ensued, Ismael turned to see someone running at him with something in his hand. It was a grenade, which exploded close by. The explosion hurled shrapnel into Ismael's body, fracturing his skull and causing a traumatic brain injury. He was only 23 at the time.

Now, Ismael – a husband and father of four – is working in my office to help the veterans of the 23rd Congressional District get the support they need.

Because continuing healthcare is such a critical component of a veteran's quality of life, I've worked to open three new clinics for veterans in our district. The clinics in South Bexar County, Del Rio and Uvalde are now providing services to veterans, reducing the need for many vets to travel long distances to get help they need.

I also recently sponsored H.R. 3577, the EARNED Act, which allows service members who

served after Sept. 10, 2001 and retired before July 31, 2009 to pass on their GI Bill benefits to their dependents. This expanded access to educational benefits will help military families pursue higher education and improve their economic situation.

Congress has passed some significant legislation recently that will help military families. They include:

The Veterans Health Care Budget Reform and Transparency Act of 2009, which allocates VA funding on a two-year cycle, allowing for better planning of services for veterans.

The Military Spouse Residency Relief Act, which allows the spouses of active duty service members to claim the same state of residency as their military sponsors. This can mean paying lower taxes and retaining the right to vote in one's original state.

The FY 2010 Defense Authorization Bill, which equips our military with technology and equipment, boosts pay and access to healthcare and eliminates waste and fraud.

These are a just a few of the ways that Congress is looking out for veterans. I would ask you all reading this today to reflect on their commitment. And take the opportunity to thank a veteran this week.

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